

ALMOST A TRAGEDY



(A True Story.)

BY CELIA THAXTER.

"CHRISTINE! May we come in and see you to-night, Christine?" The children, peeping in at the kitchen door, pushed it wide and danced over the threshold, delighted at the smile which greeted them.

There were three of them, Sylvia Hastings and her little brother, Charlie, and Archie, a boy of fourteen, at home for the winter holidays. Dearly they loved to visit Christine in her bright kitchen, and no wonder, for both the place and its occupant were most cheerful, to say nothing of the charms of Minzie, the sleek Maltese cat that lay basking on the mat in the red glow of the fire, and the absurd old gray parrot that sat muffled up in his feathers on a perch in the corner of the room. It was early dusk of the winter day, sharp and cold; a thin, crisp layer of snow covered the ground without, and made the warmth and brightness within more delightful. And as for Christine, the Norwegian maid who kept the house, she was as refreshing as morning sunshine, with her rosy cheeks and milk-white skin, and rich hair piled in a beautiful red-gold heap at the top of her head. The children adored her, and her employers blessed the land of Norway for having produced anything so charming and so satisfactory.

"Now, what are you doing, Christine?" asked Sylvia, as they stood by the table and peered into a dull, red earthen dish filled with water, in which lay potatoes peeled as smooth as ivory. "What are those things? Potatoes? Are n't they pretty, Archie? They look just like ivory!"

"Take me up and show me!" cried little Charlie, and Archie lifted him so that he could peep, too. Christine laid a clean towel on the table, spread the potatoes on it, rolled them about in it till they were quite dry, then put them into a shallow tin pan which she had buttered, and shook them till they all shone with a thin coat of butter.

"What are they for?" asked Sylvia.

"To bake for your supper, Miss Sylvia," answered Christine.

"But why do you butter them?"

"Oh, so they may bake a lovely light brown, and the skin you will not have to take off at all!" answered she.

"Oh, yes, I know," said Sylvia, "they are so good!" and while Christie went on with her preparations for supper, all three sat themselves down on the neat braided mat beside Minzie, the sleepy comfortable cat. She stretched her long length out slowly, and really seemed to smile at the children, as she lay in the ruddy firelight with her eyes half shut, lazily responding to their caresses. She put out her paw, its sharp claws softly sheathed, and with a deprecating gesture gently patted their hands, as if she were boxing her pet kitten's ears.

"Pretty Minzie!" Archie said, "you are so good-natured, and you know so much!"

"Good evening, good evening! Won't you take a walk?" cried a harsh voice from the corner.

"It 's Polly!" cried Sylvia. "Oh, you ridiculous old bird! How you startled me!"

"What have you got in your pocket?" Polly continued, turning her head this way and that, and eying the children askance.

"Poor Polly! Not a thing!" said Sylvia. "I wish I had thought to save some nuts for you!"

"What does Polly want? What does Polly want!" cried the bird, and then began to utter sounds no language can describe; sounds which more nearly resembled the racket of a watchman's rattle gone distracted than anything else I can think of.

Minzie raised her head and looked toward the corner where Polly was perched, and then settled comfortably back again, blinking her green eyes.

"Wise kitty!" said Archie.

"Indeed she is wise," said Sylvia. "What do you think she did, Archie? When we fed the birds under the dining-room window, she hid in the hedge and pounced on a bird every day, till Mamma at last gave up feeding them at all, for it seemed cruel to lead them into a trap like that. Well, what does Minzie do then but steal a piece of bread from the kitchen and carry it out on the snow, and there

bite it and crumble it, herself, and scratch and scatter the crumbs all about. Then she hid in the hedge, the sly thing! and watched. Down came the birds—poor little hungry dears, and Minzie sprang and caught one, and off she went with him to eat him up behind a bush. Oh, you naughty, naughty cat!" continued Sylvia, lifting her finger and shaking her head at the comfortable creature, who only blinked in supreme indifference and content. "I wonder at you! How can you be so cruel?"

"But she is n't naughty, Syl," said Archie. "Cats were made to catch birds, don't you know it?"

"Well, I would n't pounce on poor little birds and eat them if I were a cat," cried Sylvia.

"And I would n't eat 'ittle birds," said Charlie, making up a virtuous, wee mouth which Sylvia stooped to kiss at once, it was so irresistible.

"But you *do* eat them, Syl," Archie said. "You are just as bad as Minzie." Sylvia turned to him a shocked little face. "What do you mean, Archie?" she said.

"Why, Syl dear, did n't I see twelve small birds served up on a dish yesterday at dinner, and did n't you eat one, all but his bones? And all their claws were curled up so pitifully above them, too!"

"Oh, but Archie, that 's something quite different! Those birds were bought at the butcher's, you know."

"Never mind," interrupted Archie; "it is very nearly the same thing. You were made to eat some kinds of birds as well as kitty, so don't you blame her for doing what you do yourself. Don't you remember when Papa was reading to mamma last night in a book called 'Emerson's Essays,' how astonished Mamma was when he read this, 'Only the butcher stands between us and the tiger,' or something like that, and how they talked about it afterward? The cat is a little tiger,—she belongs to the same family."

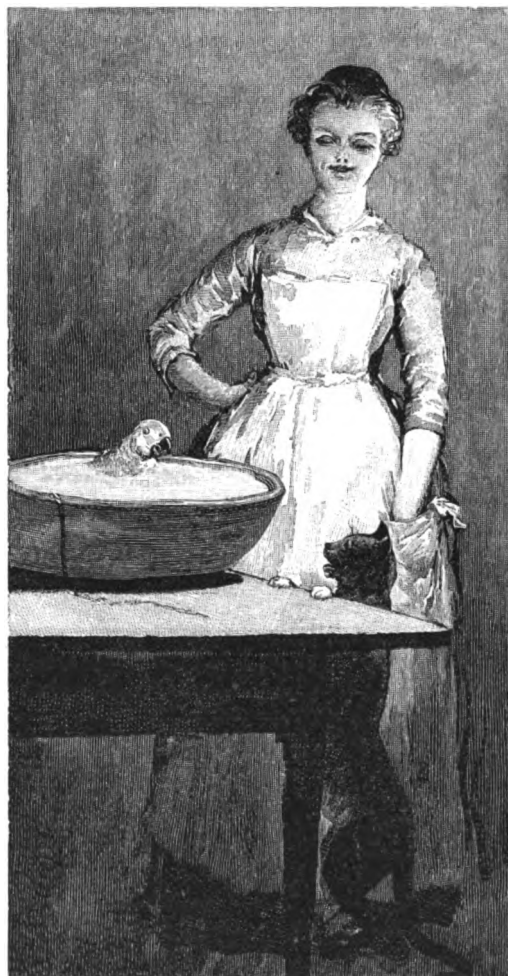
"Yes, I heard them talking," said Sylvia, "but I did n't understand."

"Well, never mind, dear," her brother answered; "I don't think it is very easy to understand! We need n't trouble ourselves about it. Only don't you blame poor Minzie for doing what she was made to do." Sylvia shook her head thoughtfully; she found it a very hard riddle to read. Most of us do.

"Ship ahoy!" cried a harsh voice from the corner. "Good morning, dear! How do you do? What have you got in your pocket? Polly wants a cracker! Good gracious! Wish you happy New Year!"

They all broke into laughter, Christine's merry

voice mingling in the chorus. Minzie rose from the mat, stretched herself, slowly crossed the room to where Polly sat chattering on her perch, and began to play with the chain by which the bird was fastened, giving the loop a push with her paw where it hung down, striking it every time it swung within reach. The parrot watched her meanwhile with the greatest interest. "Miaw!" cried Polly, suddenly. Minzie stopped and looked up. "Ha, ha, ha!" shouted the bird, as much as to say, "Did you think it was another cat?"



"THERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DOUGH SAT POLLY."
(SEE NEXT PAGE.)

and forthwith began to scream afresh, crowing like a cock, barking like a dog, imitating the creaking of a door, and then suddenly going into a frenzy of sneezing, and coughing and snuffling, like a person in the most desperate stages of influenza.

Minzie sat still, looking up at the bird, as if she enjoyed the performance; and as for the children, they laughed till they were tired.

"Truly, they are the best of friends, the two," said Christie. "I don't know what one would do without the other; they play with each other by the hour together."

"Come, Sylvia, bring Charlie upstairs; it is time," called Mamma's voice, and away the children skipped.

Christie went to and fro about her work—the pleasantest picture imaginable. "I think I'll set my bread to rising before supper," she said to herself; "then I shall have more time to write my letter home this evening." So she worked fast and busily, and when the bread was made, she put it in a large wooden bowl and covered it up with a nice white towel, and left it to rise on the dresser. The cat and the parrot watched all these operations with an interest that amused her,—it was so human.

After supper, when she had done all her work and everything was in order for the night, she bade good evening to Minzie and Polly and went upstairs to write her weekly letter to her dear far-off Norway. Her room was very warm and comfortable, and as fresh and tidy as herself. She set her lamp down on the table, took out her little portfolio from the drawer, and began to write. She wrote slowly and had been busy about an hour when she heard a loud, distressed "Miaw!" outside her door. She looked up. "Miaw! Miaw! Miaw!" sounded quickly and anxiously from Minzie. Evidently something unusual was the matter. She had never heard so anxious a cry from that comfortable cat before.

"Why, what is it?" she cried, as she rose and opened the door. Minzie sprang in, apparently greatly excited, with her tail upright and curling at the top; she ran round and round Christie, rubbing herself against the girl's ankles and looking up into her face with a most curious expression of solicitude and agitation. "What is the matter? What is the trouble, Minzie?" Christie kept asking, as if the poor dumb creature could explain her distress in words. But Minzie only "miawed" more distractedly than before; she went toward the door, looking back at Christie, then ran to her again, took hold of her apron with her teeth and tried to drag her toward the door. "You want me to go down stairs?"

The cat frisked before her, turning to see if she were following; then, as if satisfied, she fled lightly and swiftly down the stair and into the kitchen, Christie coming after, bearing the lamp in her hand. When she reached the kitchen door she heard a cry from the parrot.

"Come, come, come!" cried Polly. "Good gracious! Won't you take a walk?"

The voice did not proceed from the bird's accustomed corner, and looking about, the first thing Christie saw was the linen towel she had spread over the bread, on the floor, and Minzie standing up on her hind paws with her two white-mittened fore-feet at the edge of the table, craning her head forward and crying piteously. There, in the middle of the large pan of soft dough sat Polly, sunk to her shoulders in the sticky mass, only her neck and head with its huge black beak and glassy yellow eyes, to be seen. She had pulled the towel off the bread, and in process of investigating it had become fastened in the thick paste, sinking deeper and deeper till she was in danger of disappearing altogether.

"Ship ahoy!" cried Polly. "Come! Poor Polly! What does Polly want?"

Christine burst into laughter, and, greatly to Minzie's distress, lost time in going to call Sylvia and Archie before rescuing the prisoner from her perilous position.

"Oh, dear!" cried Sylvia. "How dreadful! What shall we do, Archie?"

Archie, with shouts of merriment, helped Christie disengage the poor bird, and they set her into a basin of warm water to soak. She was perfectly quiet and let them do as they pleased with her, only ejaculating now and then, "Good gracious! What does Polly want? Oh, my! Won't you take a walk?" with other irrelevant remarks, which sent her deliverers off into fresh peals of laughter.

"It's all very well to laugh," said Christine, "and nobody could help it; but if it had not been for Minzie, poor Polly *would* have been smothered in the dough, and that would have been 'Good gracious!' I think!" Then she told the children how Minzie had called her, and insisted on her coming down stairs. They petted the cat and gave her no end of praise, but "Oh, you naughty bird!" cried Syl to the parrot. "Now you see what it is to meddle with things that don't concern you! Just think of it! All Christie's nice bread must go to feed the chickens, and you came near losing your life! Don't you ever meddle again, Polly; do you hear?"

Polly looked too comical. They had washed her as well as they could, and tried to dry her, and had set her on her perch as near as they dared to the fire. She was so bedraggled and forlorn, with her wet, ruffled feathers, and her lean, shivering body! Minzie sat and looked up at her with sympathetic eyes.

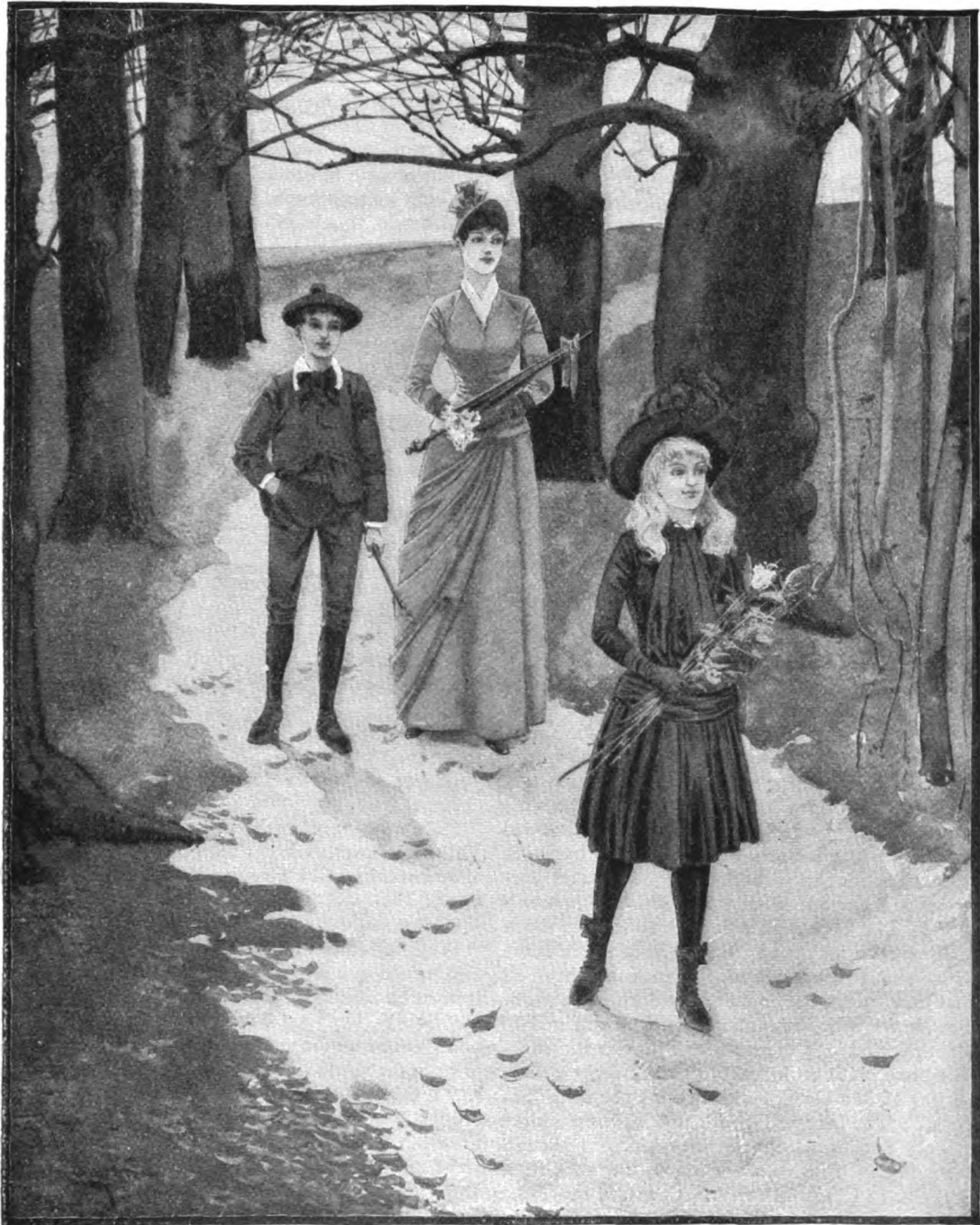
"Bless my soul! What does Polly want?" chattered the poor bird.

"I should think you wanted to be punished if

you were n't punished enough already," laughed Christie, as she fastened the chain more securely about the parrot's leg.

Then she proceeded to make a fresh bowlful of

bread in place of that which had nearly made an end of poor Polly; and presently left the two occupants of the kitchen to take care of each other till morning.



INTO THE OCTOBER WOODS.